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ABSTRACT

This article outlines a 2-year foreign language in the elementary school (FLES) pilot project that resulted in an unusual model of program funding and considers additional issues relevant to funding such programs. The 1990-1992 pilot project implemented by Michigan State University, the Black Child and Family Institute of Lansing, and the Lansing School District demonstrated that foreign language instruction begun in the elementary school benefits children. The 2-part program (part one: academic year program; and part two: summer program) provided instruction in French, German, Japanese, and Spanish to 150 students, grades 1-6, in which 77% were Black, 4% Asian American, and 4% Hispanic; almost 40% scored below the 60th percentile in Math and Reading on assessment tests administered by the State. Goals were to teach the children, make them more culturally aware, develop a working model of FLES, and train teachers in FLES. Outcome was measured in retention rate, absenteeism, class expectations and outcomes, and data obtained from parents or guardians. Results showed that the program sustained children's interest, collaborated by a 44% response from parents that their children seemed more interested in school under the FLES program. (NAV)

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A Pilot FLES* Project: Overview and Reflections

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Foreign language programs in the elementary school increased in number and in scope in the 1980s, and from all appearances did so generally in spite of the financial problems confronting educational systems that one hears so much about. If states implement their plans in the 1990s, whether they resolve their funding issues or not, it is only reasonable to expect that the trend will continue upwards. The pattern for Michigan in the 1980s was a repetition of the national trend. School districts introduced or expanded foreign language programs into the lower elementary grades in accord with the findings and recommendations of many national and state reports that argued for FLES*, and their programs reflected the three basic models of FLES* - FLES, FLEX and Immersion. Regardless of the overall pattern in the state, however, Lansing, Michigan, the state capital, was not unlike other districts that experienced severe funding problems, and it lagged considerably behind state and national trends. In fact, it continues to do so, for no FLES* program has yet been initiated by the local district. Lansing, Michigan — the large contiguous community located within two miles of Michigan State University — is the seat of state government, BOC - the General Motors division of Buick, Oldsmobile and Cadillac, and numerous businesses that support the car industry.

Contrary to what it may seem, the present paper does not intend to be an indictment of a local school district, its purpose, rather, is twofold: to recount a two-year pilot project in FLES*, 1990-1992, which resulted in the forging of an unusual model, if not of foreign language for elementary school children, at least of program funding, and to consider some issues relevant to funding.

With the collaboration and cooperation of three distinct agencies, a pilot project was implemented by Michigan State University, the Black Child and Family Institute of Lansing, and the Lansing School District, and demonstrated to any doubter what educational reports were proclaiming and what foreign language professionals have known for some time: foreign language instruction begun in the elementary school benefits children. The educational experiences and accomplishments of the students involved in this pilot project underscore research data and outcome projections of second language theorists.

In 1990 Michigan State University (MSU) through the Department of Romance and Classical Languages inaugurated a FLES* program for children of the Lansing School District (LSD). Building upon the principle that formal language acquisition best takes place in children in the lower grades and under an interactive, intensive mode of instruction, this innovative, two-part program provided language instruction in French, German, Japanese and Spanish to 150 students from this district in which language instruction is not available in elementary schools. Part One of the program took place during the academic year at the Black Child and Family Institute (BCFI), and Part Two, during the summer at MSU.

> Parent or guardian commitment to the program was a *sine qua non*.

A word on the nature of the BCFI and the place of foreign languages in its agenda is in order. In 1986, the symposium "Black Child in Crisis," which was held in Lansing, convened over 800 community residents to discuss the problems and crises of Black children. The participants identified major problem areas that needed to be addressed by the state and the local community. The symposium resulted in two major community- based outcomes: the prioritization of the identified needs, and the establishment of the BCFI, a community-based mechanism through which the community could facilitate and implement activities aimed at resolving the high-priority problems.

The BCFI's Board of Directors was a broad-based coalition of individuals, professional associations, community-based organizations, religious institutions, fraternities, sororities, human service agencies and public and private entities. One of the major goals of the BCFI was to assure that citizens of the greater Lansing area participate in the decision-making processes which affect their lives and the life of the community, and to that end involve all who wished to participate in a wide range of activities and groups designed to confront the problems of children identified through the symposium regardless of race, creed, sex, or national origin.

The program thrusts of the BCFI reflect the identified concerns, specifically in four major areas: Family and Child, Health and Mental Health, Education and Schooling, and Employment and Economic Security.

In the area of Education and Schooling the BCFI instituted early on a tutoring service for any Lansing elementary or secondary school child. The Superintendent of the LSD publicly acknowledged the impact that the BCFI's tutoring service had in reducing the drop-out rate within the district. Other initiatives relevant to Education and Schooling included a hands-on science experience for elementary and middle-school students, "Brand New Me," seminars and workshops for adolescent girls on self-esteem, self-awareness, career and educational goal setting, and enrichment classes in computer skills, Suzuki and dance. The FLES* program, initially part of the Institute's enrichment efforts, represents to date the largest educational venture to take place at the BCFI since its inception.

Characterisitics of the target population. The FLES* program enrolled 150 students, grades 1 - 6, representing the following racial/ethnic groups: Black, 77%; Asian American 4%; Hispanic 4%; Other 11%. Of the population, 23.7% of the chil-

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dren were designated by the District for categorical funding, and 3.9% as Special Education, two of the factors used to identify "at-risk" children in the LSD. On assessment tests administered by the state of Michigan, almost 40% of this student population had scored below the 60th percentile in Math and Reading.

Goals. The program worked towards achieving two sets of goals — educational goals that focused on the children, and longer range, district-centered goals. The first set aimed to: a) provide instruction in foreign languages, according to communicative models, specifically in French, German, Japanese, and Spanish; b) make children aware of the countries in which the languages are spoken; c) expand their understanding and tolerance of cultural similarities and differences; d) increase their awareness of and sensitivity to language with a view towards developing further their English language skills through their experiences with a second language; e) introduce an awareness of a world beyond their own community that could be within their reach, f) introduce children to the idea and reality of a university; g) and expand their sense of community to a global level.

The district-centered goals intended to provide the LSD with a working model of FLES* and train teachers for FLES* for the long-range purpose of establishing a viable program that could be easily adopted by and transferred to the LSD. This long-range purpose has not been realized.

Instructional staff. Nine teachers initially made up the instructional staff. They were selected on the basis of their native or native-like proficiency in their respective language, their experience and/or training in methods of teaching a foreign language, and their experience and/or training in working with elementary school children.

To prepare them for the MSU-BCFI-LSD program they received specialized training in FLES* in workshops conducted exclusively for them by Lynn Haire, Coordinator of Foreign Languages, Ferndale Public Schools, Ferndale Michigan. These sessions occurred prior to the commencement of the program. In addition, the teachers attended other workshops held at MSU conducted by such recognized national leaders of FLES* as Helena Anderson Curtain, Gladys Lipton, Myriam Met, and Carol Ann Pesola.

Part One: Academic Year Program. During the academic year, foreign language instruction in the four target languages was offered in fourteen classes, each meeting three days per week (Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays) at the close of the regular school day. The 150 students, representing grades 1 - 6, were grouped by grade levels with an average student:teacher ratio of 10+:1. Classes of forty minutes' duration were held at the BCFI site, a former LSD elementary school building. The LSD bused the children from their respective home schools to the BCFI. Transportation was crucial to the implementation of the program, especially in view of scheduling constraints and the fact that the students came from thirty of the thirty-five elementary school buildings scattered throughout the district. Following the foreign language classes, the LSD would bus many of the students to their respective neighborhoods.

> If one is to expect foreign languages, or for that matter any subject area, to be a regular part of the curriculum, it must be funded in the manner in which other core areas are financed.

Teachers used the curriculum developed for the carefully articulated 1 - 12 foreign language program of Ferndale, Michigan, as their instructional basis, modifying it was necessary to accommodate program idiosyncrasies. In grades 1 - 3, 80-90% of the time was spent on developing listening and speaking skills; in grades 4 - 6, approximately 60-70% of the time was devoted to the listening and speaking skills.

Parent or guardian commitment to the program was a *sine qua non*. At the outset, they were required to sign a pledge of support of their children, committing them to assist and encourage their children to learn, to volunteer to assist in the program when possible, and to attend monthly meetings in which they would keep learning about the program, the methodology that was being used, the progress of the children, and about the different countries in which the target languages are spoken.

At the close of the academic year, parents and students assembled at MSU for an end-of-the- year program. Each class participated in a special performance to demonstrate some of the linguistic skills and cultural insights acquired over the course of the year. Each child was given a certificate attesting to his/her participation, and the parents received individually prepared assessment statements concerning the specific achievements and language performance levels of their children, statements that would also be informative to a foreign language teacher should the children move into another school district or should the LSD initiate its own FLES* program.

Part two: Summer program. The academic year program was followed by a two-week component held on the campus of MSU. LSD buses transported the children to the university where their daily three-hour stay included: intensive in-class instruction, a brief recreational period of soccer, visits to such university facilities of interest as the museum, language laboratory, art gallery, farms, dairy, dormitories, and gardens. During the recreational period and the specific visitations on campus, the students would hear the instructions and explanations given in the language of their class. Thus, language instruction and language acquisition were planned for both formal and informal environments as the children simultaneously experienced different features of the University campus.

Funding model. This language program represents a cooperative venture of three distinct agencies, each of which contributed hard dollars and in-kind services to obtain the educational goals outlined earlier.

MSU entered into this collaborative venture with a view towards providing some interim funding, perhaps for two years, while other sources or agencies considering absorbing or continuing the project. During two year MSU bore the costs of the instruction and instructional materials and services for both the academic and summer components of the program. Included under instruction are the salaries of teachers and the fees for inservice workshop pre-

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senters. Instructional materials and services consisted of both consumable and reusable classroom materials — paper, felt board, models, realia, etc. — and such services as the duplication and copying of materials. MSU bore the costs of the on-site coordinator whose responsibilities included overseeing the day-to-day operations of the foreign language program at the BCFI, working with parents, scheduling, directing the meetings of the parents, monitoring the arrival and departure of the students via buses, and recruiting volunteers to assist. In addition, MSU paid for the LSD buses for the summer component. In-kind costs from MSU included the use of classrooms and other facilities during the summer.

BCFI made a significant contribution, funding the use of the facilities and day-to-day services. For example, BCFI provided the classrooms for the academic year program, and paid for the healthful snacks that were made available to the children upon their arrival to the Institute and prior to attending class. Secretarial or receptionist staff and telephones were also granted.

LSD's absorbed the transportation costs associated with the academic year program. Given the complex special nature of the program within the District, transportation was crucial to the implementation of the program and to the success of the project. It included bussing 150 students from thirty different buildings to the BCFI three days each week and transporting those who needed it back to their neighborhoods at the close of classes. LSD assisted as well by providing pupil service staff to gather demographic and other types of information about the students involved in the pilot project.

Evaluation. Diverse criteria used to evaluate the program include retention rate, absenteeism, class expectations and outcomes, and data obtained from parents or guardians.

The data clearly showed that the program was successful in sustaining the initial level of interest and enthusiasm of the children as measured by retention and absenteeism. During the first year of the program, enrollment attrition was 7%, and over the course of the two years, attrition reached 21%, resulting in an overall retention rate of 79%. The loss of students over the two-year period is attributed primarily to students moving out of the district and students advancing beyond grade 6. Absenteeism in the program averaged approximately 4% daily, a rate considerably lower than the 10+% rate in the LSD.

Data from the teachers showed that in grades 1-3 they actively used the target language 80-90% of the time, and in grades 4-6, 60-70% of the time. At the conclusion of the program, students' active vocabulary ranged from an average of 50 words in the lower grades to over 100 in the upper grades, and their passive vocabulary for listening comprehension approximated twice the average of what they used actively within both groups. The children were able to give commands in the target language, recite or sing some songs or rhymes, give greetings, comment on their health, state some emotions, use numbers, identify likes, dislikes, and preferences, and manipulate descriptors, especially of physical attributes.

The parents/guardians contributed to the evaluation process. Data collected from them via a multiple-cell questionnaire with provisions for open-ended responses concerned perceptual issues and conclusions they reached over the course of the project. The return rate of the questionnaire was 75%. To try to establish corollaries and determine cause/effect relationships on perception-based data can be a shaky methodology and produce invalid results. The data collected from the questionnaires are precisely that, data. There was no attempt to draw universal conclusions or projections from them. Samples of some types of information or perceptions are given here. Data showed that:

- 44% of the respondents perceived their children to be more interested in regular school at the conclusion of the foreign language program. Reasons volunteered by parents include: the foreign language experience enhances learning; they use the target language and routines when they do math; they share information about foreign languages and cultures with children in their home schools.
- 25% stated that their children preferred the foreign language program to regular school. Reasons included comments on "a good learning environment," the children "feel special," and "possible foreign travel."
- 81% believed that foreign language study helps children have a different opinion of themselves. Some commented that their child "feels better" about her/himself; is "less shy," or has a "more positive attitude about her/himself."
- 85% believed that foreign language study helps children develop a sense of tolerance.
- 92% reported that foreign language study helps children improve their understanding and use of English. Some reported that their child seems "more attentive" to conversations, has better "listening skills," and inquires regularly about "correctness of pronunciation or grammar of English.
- 100% would want their child to continue studying a foreign language. This is, in effect, the bottom line that reflects their experiences with the program, their desires for the children, and, perhaps as well, their own education about foreign languages and cultures that took place during the course of the project.

As Director of the MSU-BCFI-LSD pilot project, I believe that one can recognize in it some issues about funding foreign language programs. Such is especially true at a time when the financing of education has received national attention, traditional funding models of public education are being scrutinized, and, as we all know, foreign language programs have traditionally been a prime target when budget exigencies dictate educational policy. Some foreign language professionals might even consider the confluence of these situations quite troublesome.

The collaboration of several agencies in funding pilot projects is, of course, nothing new, and the practice unquestionably should be continued. Pilot projects, however, are precisely that; they are experimental, they initiate, but they are not meant to endure.

One might argue that collaborative funding can help respond to the crisis that confronts

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public education, however, it is ultimately a question of ownership. If one is to expect foreign languages, or for that matter any subject area, to be a regular part of the curriculum, it must be funded in the manner in which other core areas are financed. Lansing, Michigan, in this sense is not unlike other school districts throughout the nation. Although this specific pilot project and others similarly constructed can benefit children, ultimately they are only stopgap measures, for the curriculum needs to be viewed in more enduring terms.

When the budgetary ax threatens, foreign language teachers or coordinators begin to question how funding can be found to save their program. Efforts might better be spent in questioning all along why their foreign language is not a part of the core curriculum, that composite of educational policies to which their district is committed.

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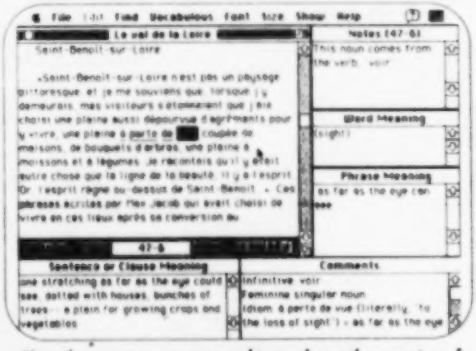

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